

Grammar Guru VI

V. Saraswathi

Here are some interesting phrases from hoardings and shop name boards:

Beauty care that let's me be me!

Recruitment at it's best!

Chicken's and egg's

To my darling wife - your the only one!

What are these? They are all examples of the abuse of the punctuation mark *apostrophe* sent to the Apostrophe Protection Society.

In Greek, the word *apostrophe* means 'turning away' and hence, omission or elision. It looks exactly like a humble, modest, single inverted comma. The apostrophe has two main functions as expounded by experts in grammar:

(i) It denotes missing letters, e.g. *can't, don't, it's*.

(ii) It denotes possessives, e.g. *cat's tail, school's emblem, Rita's father*.

An apostrophe is never ever used to denote plurals. It is wrong to say *banana's for sale; 1000's of bargains*.

The history of the apostrophe is quite fascinating. In the beginning, true to its lineage, it indicated only omission of letters, as seen in Shakespeare's **Hamlet**:

"Fie on't! Fie!"

'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished"

"I am too much i' the sun."

Later its use was extended to singular possessives in the 17th century: e.g. *a girl's dress*. During the 18th century, it conquered the territory of plural possessives as well: e.g. *girls' dresses*.

An Association for the Abolition of the Aberrant Apostrophe was operated by Keith Waterhouse. The British founder of the Apostrophe Protection Society earned in 2001 the **Ig Nobel Prize** for his efforts to "protect, promote and defend the differences between the plural and the possessive."

Apostrophes are too important to be dismissed as non-principal punctuation marks. They can effect drastic change in meaning as demonstrated so cleverly by Kingsley Amis:

(i) *Those things over there are my husband's.*
(= Those things belong to my husband)

(ii) *Those things over there are my husbands.*
(= I'm married to all the men over there)

The most common but serious mistake we make is the confusion of the possessive and contractive forms of **it: its** and **it's**. Here's a rule to help you:

The word "**it's**" stands for "**it is**" or "**it has**".

The word "**its**" stands for the *possessive*.

It's hot in here. [It is hot in here]

It's been raining for an hour. [It has been raining for an hour]

The dog wagged **its** tail when I came in.

Don't ever say **it's** when you mean the possessive.

In his *Language Instinct*, Stephen Pinker claims that possessive apostrophes do matter and their usage affects the meaning of written English. Here's his brainteaser for you. Can you sort out the four different meanings of the four sentences below?

My sister's friend's investments.

My sister's friends' investments.

My sisters' friend's investment.

My sisters' friends' investment.

Good luck and God speed!

Dr. V. Saraswathi, (Formerly) Professor of English (ELT), University of Madras.

[Editor's Note: *This is part of a series of articles contributed by the author and published earlier in The Times of India, Education Times from May 2008 to May 2013. We are thankful to the author to permit us to publish those articles in our journal.]*

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